

Washington, DC -- On Saturday, March 25, Congressman Joe Sestak (PA-7), addressed the TS Mason DE529 unit of the U.S. Naval Sea Cadets at their Fifth Annual Luncheon.

The U.S. Naval Sea Cadet Corps was established in 1958 in order to provide youth with a drug-free and gang-free environment where individuals between the ages of 11 and 18 could develop an appreciation for the United States' naval history, customs, traditions and its significant role in national defense. The goal of the Sea Cadet Corps is to encourage young people to develop an interest in basic seamanship and teach Cadets patriotism, courage, self-confidence and self-reliance. Chief Petty Officer is the highest level a Cadet can attain and reflects years of hard work and dedication.

"Dr. Martin Luther King reminded us that everyone can be great, because anyone can serve," noted Joe at the luncheon. "All of you are here today because you have answered this call to service. I am proud of your achievements, and I know that all of you represent the best of the crew of the Mason DE 529. "

The TS Mason DE529 is a U.S. Navy League Cadet Corps (NLCC) unit within the Naval Sea Cadet Corps, which was formed in 2001 at Penn Wood West Junior High School in honor of the heroism of the men who served on the TS Mason DE529.

The Mason DE-529 was launched in November 1943 and served as convoy escort in the Atlantic through the remainder of World War II. Mason DE-529 is the only U.S. Navy destroyer to be manned with a predominantly black enlisted crew. Until this time, African Americans who served in the Navy were not permitted to be trained and served in ratings other than cooks and stewards. Upon commissioning, 160 African American sailors were enrolled in all fields of operational and technical training to man the ship.

The Mason DE-529 served with distinction during World War II. In particular, even though the Mason's deck split threatening the structural integrity of the ship during a particularly terrible storm, the crew of the Mason performed emergency repairs and immediately returned to assist in its duties of escorting a convoy of merchant ships bound for England.

The Mason crew was recommended for commendations from both their captain, Lieutenant Commander Bill Blackford, and the convoy commander, Commander Alfred Lind. The commendations were never rewarded until 1994 when President Clinton awarded the long overdue commendation to the sixty-seven surviving crewmembers. In 1998, then Secretary of the Navy John H. Dalton made official his decision to name an Arleigh Burke Destroyer the USS Mason DDG 87 to mark the contributions of USS Mason DE 529 Sailors to equality and desegregation in our Navy's ranks.

"When I was in the Navy I learned the values of duty, honor, and courage," added Joe. "Not only are you learning these same values as part of the U.S. Naval Sea Cadets, you are also learning the values of the men of the Mason: perseverance and determination. I applaud you for your efforts and the contributions that you are making to your schools and communities."

Since being formed, the unit has earned the Morgan L. Fitch, Jr. Award, an annual award given to the top ten NLCC units in the nation. Lt. JG Tonette C. Pray is Commanding Officer of the TS Mason DE529.

*Born and raised in Delaware County, former 3-star Admiral Joe Sestak served in the Navy for 31 years and now serves as the Representative from the 7th District of Pennsylvania. He led a series of operational commands at sea, including Commander of an aircraft carrier battle group of 30 U.S. and allied ships with over 15,000 sailors and 100 aircraft that conducted operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. After 9/11, Joe was the first Director of "Deep Blue," the Navy's anti-terrorism unit that established strategic and operations policies for the "Global War on Terrorism." He served as President Clinton's Director for Defense Policy at the National Security Council in the White House, and holds a Ph.D. in Political Economy and Government from Harvard University. According to the office of the House Historian, Joe is the highest-ranking former military officer ever to serve in the U.S. House of Representatives.*

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